

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 27 November 2001
(Morning)

Session 1

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

19th Meeting 2001, Session 1

CONVENER

*Kate MacLean (Dundee West) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kay Ullrich (West of Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Mrs Lyndsay McIntosh (Central Scotland) (Con)

*Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)

Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

*Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

*attended

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Lee Bridges

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Richard Walsh

ASSISTANT CLERK

Roy McMahon

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 27 November 2001

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:17*]

Items in Private

The Convener (Kate MacLean): Unfortunately, Michael McMahon and Elaine Smith, the reporters who are to give reports under item 3, are stuck in traffic. We will get started and hope that they turn up shortly.

I ask the committee to agree to take items 4, 5 and 6 in private. Are we agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Petition

Deaf and Hard of Hearing People (Social Work Services) (PE400)

The Convener: Item 2 is consideration of petition PE400, which has been passed to us from the Public Petitions Committee. Do members have comments to make on the petition?

Kay Ullrich (West of Scotland) (SNP): I was a social worker in my previous existence. It is common practice for each social work area to have a social worker with special responsibility for the deaf. From my reading of petition PE400, it would appear that such a post became vacant in South Lanarkshire Council and the council has not replaced the social worker.

At first I thought that the subject of the petition was health, but it is a social work issue. I can see why the Public Petitions Committee passed the petition to us, as equal opportunities issues are involved. The petition could go to the Social Justice Committee, but I suggest that we handle the petition, as there are equality issues involved.

Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab): Although equality issues are involved, the petition is about a local government issue. In a number of local authorities, someone in the social work department deals with the deaf. The cover can be patchy and can rely on one person, which can lead to difficulties in ensuring coverage, support and understanding of the issues.

Perhaps we should ask one of the Equal Opportunities Committee reporters to look at the issues that are raised in the petition. We may also want to talk to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, as the issues raised concern people who work in local government social work departments.

The Convener: I must admit that it occurred to me that the Local Government Committee could deal with the petition, because of its contacts with COSLA. We could pass petition PE400 to the Local Government Committee but say that, because of the equality perspective, we will take an interest in it.

Kay Ullrich: From an equal opportunities point of view, an amount of tokenism is involved in saying that one person should take responsibility for the deaf. Services for the deaf should be integral to all social work services.

It seems that we should refer the petition to the Local Government Committee.

Cathy Peattie: There may well be an amount of tokenism involved, but the person who deals with

the issue in most local authorities has a genuine interest in and experience of the subject. There is also the issue of education and the deaf and how young people get access to appropriate education. That includes the argument about whether they should go to special schools.

Petition PE400 should go to the Local Government Committee, as that committee covers a wide spectrum. In this case, we are talking about social work, but it could be education.

The Convener: Petition PE400 calls on the Parliament to ensure that

“local authorities throughout Scotland provide adequate provision of Social Work Services”.

We will ask the reporter to look at consultation with the deaf community to see whether we need to take that further.

Cathy Peattie: That would be helpful.

The Convener: We should pass petition PE400 to the Local Government Committee and ask Gil Paterson, the disability reporter, to keep an eye on what happens. In his meetings with outside organisations, he can find out whether the Equal Opportunities Committee should consider the wider aspects of local authority services, in particular education, social work and housing.

Kay Ullrich: What has to be remembered is that a great number of deaf people are elderly.

The Convener: Are we agreed that we should pass petition PE400 to the Local Government Committee and ask Gil Paterson to take an interest in what happens to the petition?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We have heard that one of the reporters is still stuck in traffic and that he will not arrive for another 10 minutes. We will have to move on to the private part of the meeting. When the reporters arrive, we will come back into public session to take item 3. I apologise to the press and public.

10:22

Meeting continued in private.

10:51

Meeting continued in public.

Reporters

The Convener: I apologise again to members of the public and press for having to change the order of the agenda. The committee reporters have now arrived and we will move on to item 3—reports from the committee's reporters.

Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): I have held one meeting on religious issues. I will bring a report before the committee once I have built up a portfolio of reports on the various meetings that I plan to hold. I am not sure to what time scale I am working, as that depends on when the Executive or Donald Gorrie introduce a bill. I might have to speed things up, but at the moment I need to put in place meetings with two or three organisations from which I intend to take reports. I will keep the committee updated.

The Convener: Committee members have a paper, which Michael McMahon circulated. Do members have comments on it?

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): I want to ask about the last recommendation, which is that the committee

“enquires of the Scottish Executive what research is underway, or planned, on an assessment of the impact of Catholic schools on Scottish society.”

Did the Catholic Education Commission raise that point with Michael McMahon during his discussions?

Mr McMahon: The CEC is concerned about the perceptions that exist out there. There is academic research from the Scottish Office—in the past—and the Scottish Executive, but it does not include the impact of denominational education. I wanted to highlight that the CEC has raised whether information exists to back up the arguments about denominational schools, one way or another. I thought that it was worth mentioning to the committee, so that we can identify whether that is the case and, if so, make it an action point.

Elaine Smith: That is great. Is anything under way or planned at the moment? If not, do we want to make the recommendation slightly stronger? Michael has said that we should inquire of the Scottish Executive what is under way or planned. If nothing is under way or planned, do we want to ask the Scottish Executive to progress the matter?

Mr McMahon: The report will be built into a portfolio of reports. Once we have information from different sources, it may be appropriate to say that we need clarification on the matter.

A simple inquiry would tell us what information exists. When we want to examine the information, we can ask the Scottish Executive to provide us with the information that it has or we can ask it to instigate research to provide the information that everyone needs. At the moment, it is not necessary for us to have the information. I have flagged up the fact that an organisation that, by its nature, is involved in denominational education was not aware of information other than one report from Professor Paterson.

Kay Ullrich: Will you elaborate on the CEC's concern about Donald Gorrie's proposed bill?

Mr McMahon: Donald Gorrie says that, based on his consultation to date, he does not think that his bill is relevant to whether denominational schools should exist. The CEC is concerned that the issue will be part of the dialogue and process of consultation on the proposed bill. The CEC wanted me to make it clear that it does not see denominational education as playing any part in sectarian division in Scotland. Whether the bill is introduced by the Scottish Executive or by Donald Gorrie, denominational education should not be seen in the debate as contributing in any way to sectarianism in Scotland. The CEC wants to make that point very strongly.

Kay Ullrich: The bill would not seek to hinder that.

Mr McMahon: No, but the CEC is fearful—

Kay Ullrich: It is concerned about rhetoric.

Mr McMahon: It is fearful that the debate would focus on that. We have seen contributions in the press—letters and articles—saying that the divisions between schools must be considered when aspects of sectarianism in Scotland are examined.

Kay Ullrich: I can understand the CEC's concerns, but is it possible to stop that issue being raised?

Mr McMahon: The CEC cannot do that, but it wanted to ensure that the issue was flagged up. It wanted to make it clear that its perspective, and that of the Catholic church, is that a discussion of denominational education should not play any part in the debate on sectarianism. The CEC believes that denominational education does not contribute to sectarianism. Indeed, it believes that the situation is quite the opposite. It argues that someone who is provided with a Catholic education will not become sectarian.

The ethos of Catholic education is to educate the whole person in a way that allows them to understand the differences between religions. The CEC does not want to see the position of Catholic schools being brought into question as part of the process of debate leading up to a proposed bill.

Kay Ullrich: The CEC wants to have the issue flagged up.

Mr McMahon: Yes.

Kay Ullrich: The CEC does not want that alley to be gone down.

Mr McMahon: The CEC is fearful that that might happen. It wants to ensure that that does not form part of the debate on sectarianism. As it has made that point, it is appropriate for it to be included in the report.

Mrs Lyndsay McIntosh (Central Scotland) (Con): That is fair. There is a lot of misperception and misconception around the issue. Teachers have approached me to say that they are concerned that it could be the beginning of the end.

Mr McMahon: Yes, teachers are fearful about that. They are not saying that, because a bill may be introduced, they believe that it will be the case, but they want to ensure that people do not allow the issue to become part of the debate about how to end sectarianism in Scotland. The CEC wants to make it clear from the outset that denominational education should not form part of the discussion.

Kay Ullrich: Is the CEC making it clear that it is in general agreement with the intention of the bill?

Mr McMahon: No; I am not sure that it is convinced about the merits of the bill. It is aware of consultation on the bill and wants to see the consultation develop, but it does not have a clear view about whether the bill is good.

Kay Ullrich: Perhaps it is too early for it to say.

Mr McMahon: The CEC is concerned that, as soon as the process of having a bill begins—discussing the possibility—one of the dimensions that will immediately come to the fore will be denominational education. The CEC is an organisation that exists for the purpose of denominational education. It wanted to ensure that, as the Equal Opportunities Committee's reporter, I brought its concerns that that argument has started to develop to the committee's attention.

The Convener: The CEC's full views about the proposed bill will be heard in due course, as part of the wider consultation process.

As members do not have any further comments, I seek the committee's agreement to the report's recommendations. The report recommends that the committee:

- **notes** the report of the meeting

- **agrees** to send a copy of the Race Reporter paper and accompanying brief to Donald Gorrie and the NEBU—

that is the non-Executive bills unit—

“• **agrees** to consider the Bill, on introduction, and provide a contribution to the relevant Lead Committee; and

• **enquires** of the Scottish Executive what research is underway, or planned, on an assessment of the impact of Catholic schools on Scottish society.”

Are we agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

11:00

The Convener: We move on to Elaine Smith's report. Members have a copy of Elaine's paper.

Elaine Smith: Scottish Women's Aid wanted the meeting to be held. Initially, it was to be on the subject of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. A couple of dates had to be cancelled, so the meeting took place finally in October.

Part of my report looks beyond the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 to issues that Women's Aid considers to be potential problems. Some of the report covers reserved issues and the remainder covers funding, networking and the tying together of the domestic abuse issue and the wider agenda of violence against women.

On rereading paragraph 6, I see that it might not be clear. I should explain that it concerns the situation of a woman who is fleeing domestic abuse and has rent arrears. If she goes into a refuge, she will not be able to get a tenancy because of those rent arrears, yet the cost to central Government of keeping the woman in the refuge is much higher than the cost of taking steps to cancel the rent arrears. The problem with that is that the issue straddles central and local government—the rent arrears are owed to local government.

The point that Women's Aid raises is interesting. A woman might take up a space in a refuge when that place was no longer useful to her and, by being there, block others from getting the space.

The deliberate mistake in my report is that there are no recommendations. I ask the convener whether I may read them now.

The Convener: Yes.

Mrs McIntosh: Does Elaine know them now?

Elaine Smith: Yes. They are: first, that the committee notes the report; and, secondly, that the committee agrees to send a copy of the report to the relevant minister and to the Social Justice Committee.

Kay Ullrich: I like the bit about the relevant minister.

The Convener: Are we agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Meeting closed at 11:02.

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